

The
Body of Europe

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Giorgio

AGAMBEN

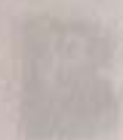
Collana dei Tre Oci

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Giorgio Agamben

The Body of
Europe

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Preface

The essays of philosopher Giorgio Agamben presented here are in a way both a prelude and a postface to the series that this book begins. Based on two lectures given at the Casa dei Tre Oci headquarters of the Berggruen Institute in Venice – one in June 2023, before the building was open to the public, and another just under a year later, on Europe Day (9 May 2024) – these lectures by Agamben opened what is now an ongoing series of monthly talks at the institute by different thinkers, many of which will become books in this ‘Tre Oci’ series. In his lectures, Agamben poses many questions that announce important topics of the institute’s work: what do we mean when we talk about ‘Europe’? What is Europe’s relation with history and culture? What is the meaning of politics and how does it relate to culture? What would it mean to govern technology? What is the relationship between human and animal? In this sense, the texts here are a prelude to the books that follow.

Agamben posits that if one wants to understand something about the present, the correct relationship to time is to consider today the last day of history and ask about the past. 'Thought's time is eschatology', for 'the only thing we can know with some assurance is the past', he writes. This does not make thought useless; quite the opposite: only by giving possibility to the past can the present reality be given back possibility, and only this potentiality has a profound influence on practice that goes beyond reproducing the existing ideological order. In his address 'The Body of Europe', Agamben considers Europe something that has already finished — and perhaps more than once — as the condition for understanding what it is, or was. In this sense, this opening volume of the series is also a kind of postface to the essays that will follow, which perhaps in their own ways will reopen the past, since they are serious about understanding the present of Europe and its planetary place and role.

In the first of the essays here, Agamben addresses the highly contemporary question of the possibility of governing technology, which leads to a deeper question of how the line between humankind and animals is drawn, what the relation is between the human and the bodily, between vegetative life and relational life, and how this division is continually updated. Ultimately, the human is

not a substance that can be defined but a threshold between body and technics, nature and culture, and in this third space, ethics and politics become both necessary and possible.

As for Agamben's own view on the sense of Europe, the reasons for asking the question are as important as the answers. Europe is always understood as a kind of tactical or strategic term, unless it refers to the mythological tale of Europa, which is its only sure meaning. 'Europe' has been used as a tactical term for many reasons, but following Étienne Gilson, Agamben starts from how Christian thinkers employed it to frame the idea of a society of societies, which would in their eyes necessarily have a spiritual union. Unmentioned here, but present in the corpus of Agamben's own writings and public interventions on the theme of Europe, is the cosmopolitan figure of Alexandre Kojève, Hegelian philosopher and bureaucrat in the French Republic, who proposed a 'Latin Empire' based on common Catholic heritage in a secret memo to de Gaulle – an idea resuscitated by Agamben in the depths of the Euro Crisis in 2013.

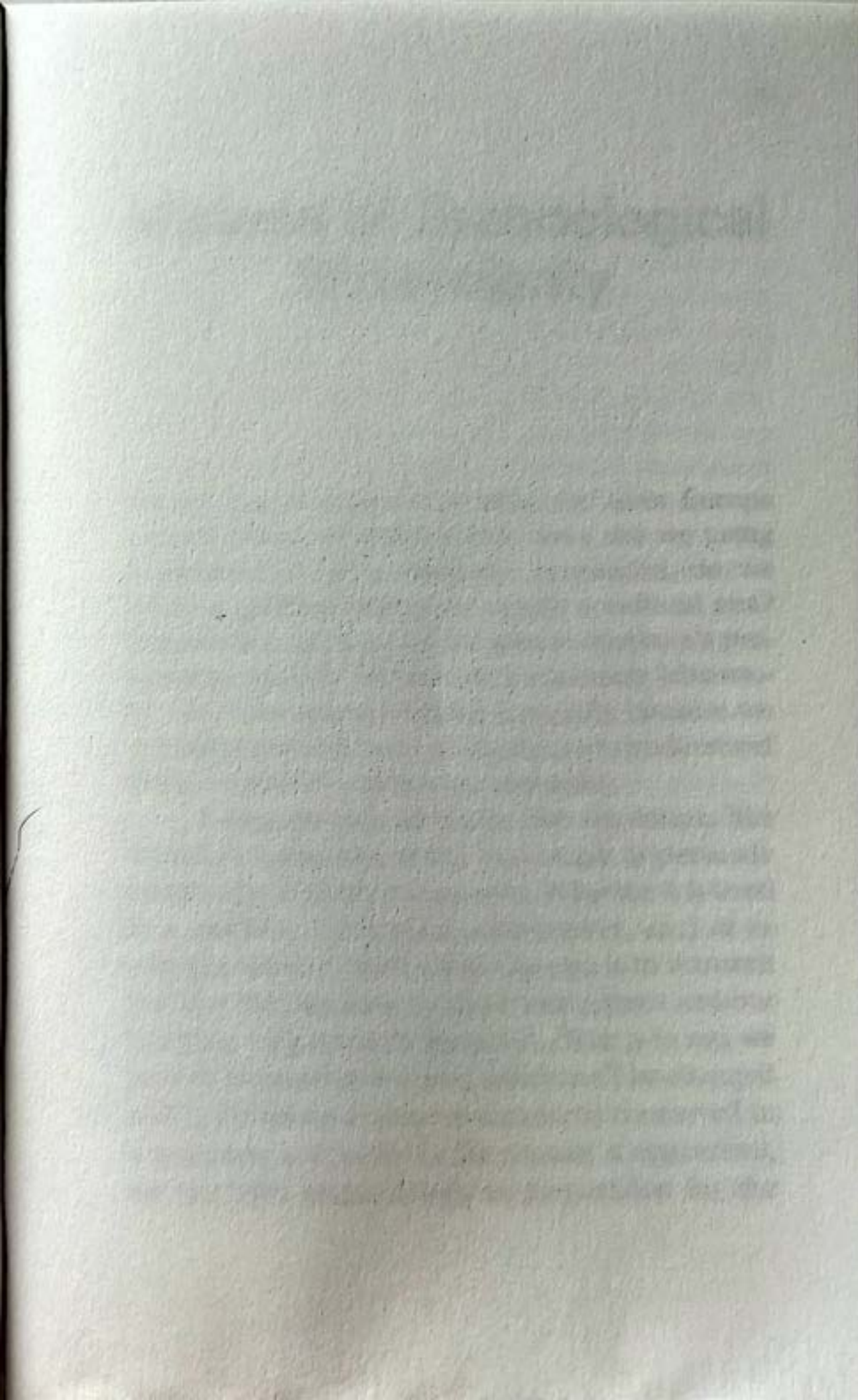
The idea of a common spirit enables Agamben to pose the crucial, repressed question of what *body of Europe* could potentially have *any* spirit or soul. Whilst today, Europe has something resembling a body politic for the first time in its history in the

form of the European Union, Agamben finds that a religious spiritual union is impossible and that the political union is fraudulent, lacking in a real constitution and therefore only an international pact amongst states masquerading as something else. Instead, Agamben sees a genuine European body in the corpus of its literature, which perpetuates a certain 'specifically European way of grasping and living everyday reality'.

Both of these essays give us the uncompromising intellectual exigency to think European politics starting from the totality of Europe's culture and heritage, not in view of imposing a frame or interpretation on that cultural fabric but rather reintroducing possibility and political agency into what may otherwise appear to be a lifeless corpse or strands that can be brought together only in a religious delusion. If these words are alive to us, then Europe's body is perhaps enacted in the archaeological act of thinking and reading that they reinaugurate.

Niccolò Milanese

Venice, May 2025



Visions of Technological Sovereignty

We do not exactly know what the term Europe means: when we employ this term, are we using a geographic or a religious expression, do we mean a political reality or simply a cultural one? Expressions used in the Berggruen Institute's programme such as 'Europe as a planetary laboratory' can thus sound unclear, especially because we are obliged to rely only on the future to understand them, which is by definition uncertain.

I suppose you all know that the future, like 'crisis', is today one of the main tools to persuade people not to think the present. Whether it is used as a bugbear (ecological catastrophes, etc.) or as a bright ideal, in both cases the aim is to transmit the idea that we have to direct our actions and our thinking only towards the future. That is to say, we have to leave aside the past, which can't be changed and is therefore useless or should be conserved in a museum, and as far as the present is concerned, we can care about it only in preparation for the

future. This is completely false. The only thing that we can know with some assurance is the past. The present is by definition difficult to grasp, while the future does not exist and can be fabricated by any impostor.

Ennio Flaiano, an Italian twentieth-century writer that I strongly recommend you to read, used to say that he had such mistrust of the future that he created projects only for the past. I believe that this joke must be taken absolutely seriously. And I will add with the same seriousness that all my archaeological investigations of the history of European culture are projects for the past only. I can state with full knowledge of the facts that archaeology is the best way to access the present.

If I had to suggest a task for your institute, therefore, I would recommend you to learn to make projects for the past, that means simply to seek in the past what is still alive and possible – in other words, to acquire the capability to give back possibility to the past. In the case of the Berggruen Institute Europe, you should begin by investigating which possibilities are still conveyed by the terms 'institute' and 'Europe'.

When I say possibility, I do not mean something unreal that we have to accomplish and make real in a more or less far future. In one of my recent investigations, I tried to criticize the

term 'realization' (in the sense of implementation) as a key term of politics. You know that what we can call the 'Western political or ontological-political machine' has always conceived politics as the implementation of philosophical ideologies. Quite on the contrary, I think that if we conceive of possibility as something that needs to be realized in a future praxis, then we will only reproduce the existent political order.

The fallacy of modern ideologies and revolutions was precisely to conceive possibility as a goal to realize: this is why they were doomed to failure. Only if you are able to think possibility as something already real will it act on the praxis without simply reproducing the existent order. Thinking does not consist in making the possible real but in making the real possible, in finding a way of escape from the unavoidability of the facts that the dominant ideology attempts to impose in any sphere, especially in politics. It is not true, like Leibniz thought, that every possible demands to become real; quite on the contrary, the truth is that every real demands to become possible. The task of thinking is to give back possibility to reality; philosophy is useful only if it makes your life possible.

This kind of task needs the capability of conceiving a model of temporality utterly different from the linear chronology which defines our

representation of time. If you want to understand the present, the best way is to locate yourself in it as if it were the last day, that is to say, as if the decisive moment of history was always in progress, without any possible delay. The right relation to time is when you have no more time. This means that thought's time is eschatology, that every day is for the philosopher the last day: *novissima dies*, as the Latin expression goes: the last is the newest day. The pattern according to which you must consider history is not the circle that constantly reverts on itself, nor the endless line; it is rather the instant interruption, the gap. The ancients had in mind something similar when they opposed to *kronos* the *kairos*, the decisive instant, whom they imagined as a young winged boy that we must grab by the hair while he passes by. Thought does not know delay: it seizes time, it does not miss the opportunity, which presents itself only once.

The instant of interruption is not timeless, is not out of historical time, for, as Walter Benjamin suggests, quoting Paul, it can form a constellation with a moment in the past. This is why it can provide the right perspective for a historical or archaeological investigation. (The past is not a simple, continuous object; when we speak of 'Western culture' or 'Western tradition', we should be aware that these expressions are just a device to put

together things that have nothing to do with one another for our own purposes. Discontinuity, not continuity, is the rule.)

One of the subjects in your institute's programme that seems particularly urgent to me is what you call 'visions of technological sovereignty'. The expression 'technological sovereignty' leaves undecided whether sovereignty *over* technology or sovereignty *of* technology is meant.

You probably know that some of the most brilliant twentieth-century minds agreed in defining the political challenge of our time as the capability of governing technology. As a great philosopher puts it: 'The today decisive question is how a political system could be adequate to the age of technology. I do not know the answer to this problem. I am not sure that it is democracy'. Another philosopher compared control over technology to the challenge of a new Hercules: 'Those who will succeed', he writes, 'in subduing technics which got out of control and in inserting it in a pragmatic order, they will respond to the problems of present surely more than those who, through technology, seek to land on the moon or on Mars'. And a brilliant theologian such as Erik Peterson saw in the Antichrist a figure of technics that, like the Antichrist, will not appear in the West nor in the East, but will be among us and take us by surprise.

The fact is that the powers which seem to use and govern technology are in reality more or less unwittingly used and governed by it. Both totalitarian and democratic regimes share the same incapability to govern technology, and both end up transforming themselves in the sense required by the technologies they believe to use for their own purposes.

Why does it seem so hard and even impossible to govern technology? A first indication for an answer can come from the fact that two scientists who considered the problem with particular attention have drawn a connection between technology and anthropogenesis, that is to say, the becoming human of the primate *Homo*. According to them, technology is so closely linked to humankind that we should say that anthropogenesis is in reality technogenesis, or better, anthropo-technogenesis. And if *art* is the Latin translation of the Greek *techne*, we can then say that humankind is an animal artist, that art is an essential component of its being.

Let me briefly summarize the two theories that I have just mentioned, which are linked to the names Lodewijk Bolk and Paul Alsberg. The two theories are similar but symmetrically opposed. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Dutch anatomist Bolk observed that humans share with monkeys some primary anatomical characteristics

that do not correspond to the somatic structure of an adult monkey but rather to the structure of a fetus. In the extraordinary little book he published in 1926, with the title *The Problem of Anthropogenesis*, Bolk draws a conclusion which in some way reverses the sense of evolution: humankind is a monkey fetus that acquired the capability of reproducing itself. Scientists already knew that evolution assumes a regressive character, as in the phenomenon of neoteny in amphibians like the axolotl, who acquire the capability of reproducing themselves when they are still in the larval phase, transforming what was a temporary stage in a new regressive species.

According to Bolk, humankind is a wholly regressive species, in which fetalization takes the form of a general slowdown of growth and development quite unparalleled among mammals. The delay of the childish condition, when the baby is utterly unable to contribute to its survival, requires the creation of those technical instruments and social structures that define human civilization. This means that human history and civilization are tightly bound to the physiological delay of the neotenic primate *Homo sapiens*. From these premises, Bolk draws pessimistic consequences for the future of humanity. The growing development of both scientific and social technologies ends up in

a general inhibition of vitality, so that, as he writes, 'the more humanity progresses along the path of technics, the more it gets closer to the fatal point where progress means destruction. And the nature of man will not stop in front of the chasm'.

Four years before Bolk's book, a German physician of Jewish origin, Paul Alsberg, published *The Enigma of Man* in Dresden, a book on the relation between technics and evolution, which was burned by the Nazis in 1933. Published again in Vienna in 1937, the book has never ceased to raise interest among philosophers and anthropologists, from Gehlen to Sloterdijk. According to Alsberg, human evolution is defined by technology and culture, which he conceives in a way symmetrically opposed to Bolk. Technologies and civilization are not the consequence of a physiological deficiency – such as fetalization or the lack of instincts – they are, on the contrary, the cause of the deficit that characterizes the human species. The decisive factor of anthropogenesis is technique: anthropogenesis and technogenesis coincide. Humankind didn't have to invent technics because it was lacking in physiological specializations, but because it became lacking owing to technological inventions.

While animal evolution is endosomatic and entails an adaptation of the body to the environment, humankind, according to Alberg, aims on

the contrary at a progressive deactivation and disabling of the body's faculties, which have since the beginning been replaced by esosomatic technologies. I quote Alsberg's theorem: "The principle of animal evolution is *Körperanpassung*, the body's adaptation; the principle of human evolution is *Körperausschaltung*, the disabling of the body through artificial instruments'. However, according to Alsberg, the deactivation of the body is not at all a diminution; it is, quite the contrary, a liberation of the body from its natural limitations. The liberation from the body is at the same time a liberation of the body. Unlike the animal, humankind can be spiritually free, only because the technics release it from its body's restraint. Deactivation and liberation of the body are one principle, which defines humanity and constitutes the material ground of humankind's freedom. Contrary to Bolk's pessimistic prophecy, humans are destined to reach their fulfillment and triumph through technology and culture.

As you can see, both authors tightly link anthropogenesis and technics, but the relationship they establish between body and technology, endosomatic and esosomatic, animal and human, is symmetrically opposed.

What is in question here is nothing less than the anthropogenetic machine of Western culture, a machine that produces the human only through

a peculiar relation with the animal. The non-human is captured within the machine by means of an exclusion, which is in reality an inclusion. The animal is included in the human through its exclusion, but the line that divides animal and human is drawn inside the human. We project backwards in time what is in reality a caesura that we draw within humankind, separating each time animality and humanity, nature and culture, body and technics. The animal, the living being continues to exist in the human body, which can never be completely humanized and in the form of vegetative life is distinguished from relationship life.

The human produced by the machine is divided and will therefore be obliged to assume the impossible task to master animality. The esosomatic element will assert itself at the expense of the endosomatic, and technologies and culture will take the form of power and domination over nature, necessarily ending up substituting themselves for nature.

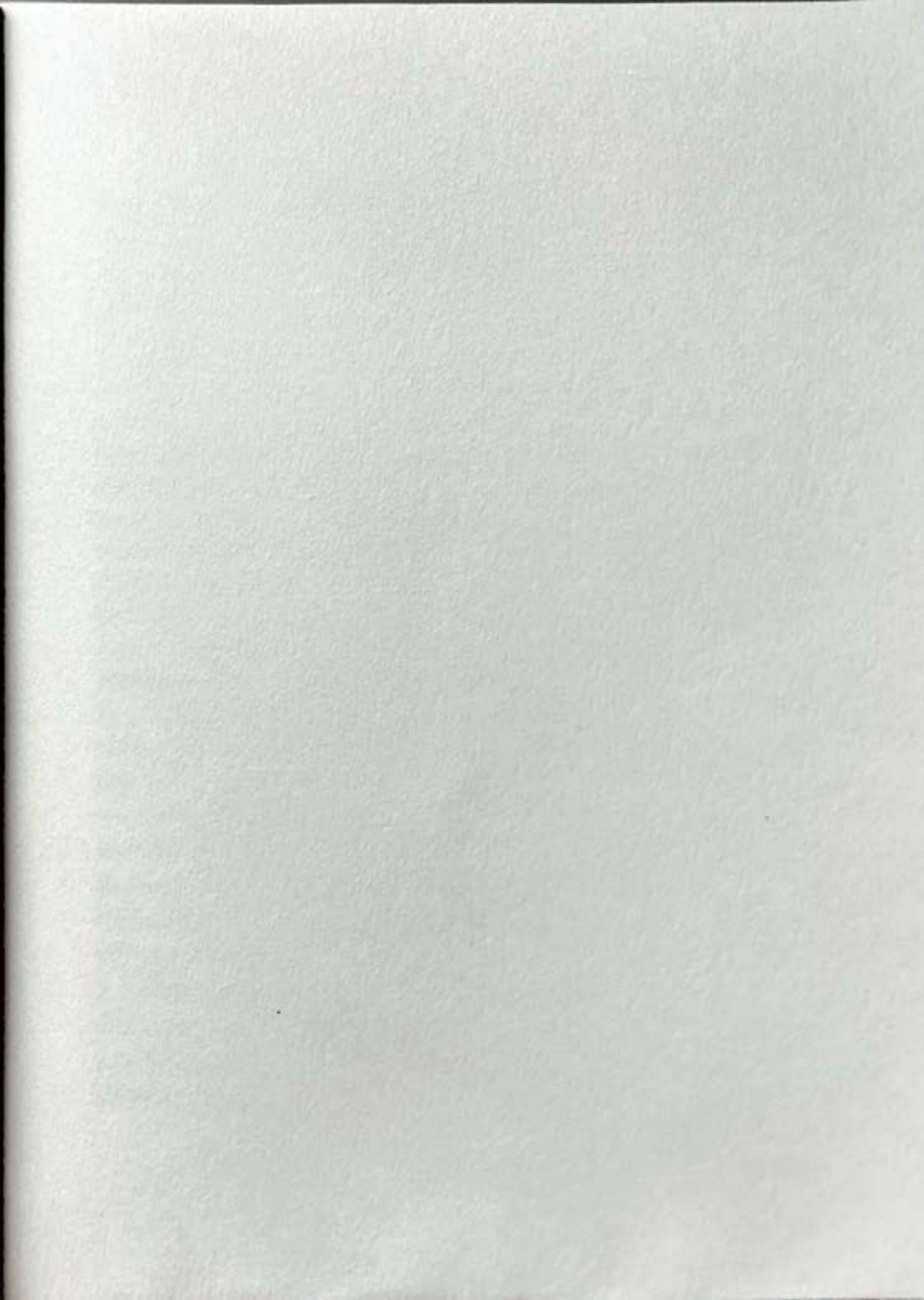
What makes humankind human and its humanity cannot be divided. There is no way to identify our being human in a factor or an anthropogenetic event, whatever it may be. Anthropogenesis, the becoming human of humankind, is not an event achieved once for all; it is a process always in progress, where humanity and animality cannot split. If it were possible to identify the element or event

which makes a human non-human, we would then be obliged to check each time whether this element is actually present in every single human and consequently decide each time who is human and who is not. This is exactly what we do not stop doing, without even realizing it, excluding human lives from humanity in this way – the Jew, the slave, the *Homo sacer*, people in a comatose state, etc. The seeming anthropological or scientific decision is in reality a political decision. This decision takes place in the centre of the anthropogenetic machine and is continuously updated, so that the split between animal and human, vegetative life and relational life, and the factor that divides and at the same time links them is unceasingly displaced and relocated.

Anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the non-human, belongs neither to the animal nor to humankind; it is neither an endosomatic event nor an esosomatic factor that one can identify. If this is true, if the becoming human of humankind cannot be located in an endosomatic or an esosomatic factor, then it becomes necessary to investigate the space between them.

The human is not a substance that you can definitively define; it is rather a threshold between endosomatic and esosomatic, between body and technics. Only in this threshold can ethics and politics find their right place; I mean an ethics and

politics that will not simply seek to command and dominate nature through technology but rather master the relationship between nature and culture, body and technics. It is in this third space, between human and non-human, body and technology, that you must locate your investigations, for it is only through it that you will be able to achieve, to use your own terms, a vision of technological sovereignty.



1871
The first of the year was a very
cold one, and the weather was
very disagreeable. The snow
was very deep, and the wind
was very strong. The people
were very much distressed,
and the government was very
kind to them. The people
were very much distressed,
and the government was very
kind to them. The people
were very much distressed,
and the government was very
kind to them.

Europe's Body

One of the worst things that can happen – unfortunately, all too common in academic conferences and debates – is discussion around a term whose meaning remains entirely undefined. This is what risks occurring here and now, since, as I trust you're aware, the meaning of the word 'Europe' can hardly be taken for granted. Apart from an extremely vague geographical expression, whose boundaries shift with times and opinions, the only certain meaning of our term is the mythological Europa: sister of Cadmus and mother of Minos, who was abducted to Crete by Zeus after he transformed himself into a bull. It is this mythological Europa whom painters, from Titian to Rembrandt, have portrayed so marvellously – a far cry from the trite, conventional symbols of political Europe. This is why I have ventured to share with you some preliminary reflections in view of a possible or – perhaps – impossible definition of the term's meaning. History shows unequivocally that Europe in the

political sense serves as a device or stratagem, deployed in response to whatever crisis looms at the moment: Islam, the New World, the East. The term 'Europe' does not denote a substantial political reality, then, but a tactical-strategic device aimed at a specific, predominately military objective. It is therefore a purely negative concept, whose content is defined from time to time in opposition to a real or fabricated enemy.

Whenever something resembling a broader political reality seems to take shape as a result of this strategic operation, it never goes beyond the immediate goals pursued, which are themselves episodic and mutable. For instance, scholars have sought to frame Carolingian Europe as a nascent version of what we now view as the project of a potential Europe. Yet, as Geoffrey Barraclough demonstrates in *The Crucible of Europe: The Ninth and Tenth Centuries in European History*,¹ this is solely by virtue of its failures and not its successes. Carolingian Europe existed in a string of failed experiments, but these experiments were doomed to fail, because they were tethered at each instance to a particular and necessarily provisional goal.

Something similar applies to how philosophers have used the word. When Marx writes that

1 Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Crucible of Europe: The Ninth and Tenth Centuries*

in European History
(University of California Press, 1976).

'[a] spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre', 'Europe' names only the political enemy that must be overthrown. And when Nietzsche describes himself as a 'good European' just a few years later, the epithet is primarily polemical in intent, directed against German culture and Christian morality, for which he felt utter disgust.

Needless to say, the task of devising a political unity from an existing plurality of nation-states is not a problem of simple legal technicalities. One of the most incisive minds of twentieth-century Catholic thought, Etienne Gilson, wrote a book I heartily recommend: *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*.² In it, he examines the myth of Europe as a secularization of Augustine's City of God, to warn against its undue political transposition. Examining the history of this myth, he cites Auguste Comte's view that '[t]he Middle Ages understood very well that a society of political societies cannot be a political society itself. It can only be a religious society'.³ For this reason, Comte had to found his universal state on a 'positive faith' – a

2 Etienne Gilson, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*, trans. James G. Colbert (Catholic University of America

Press, 2020). First published in French in 1952.

3 Gilson, 207.

religion very similar to the Christian faith it was meant to replace.

In a work that has provoked a great deal of discussion – usually published under the significant title 'Christendom or Europe', even though the author titled it simply 'Europe' – Novalis writes:

Christendom must again become lively and effective, and again form a visible Church without regard to national borders, one which will take up into its bosom all those souls who thirst for the supernatural, and gladly become the mediator between the old world and the new. (...) Christianity will rise again from the sacred bosom of a venerable European council.⁴

Rousseau, who, in *The Plan for Perpetual Peace*, tries to conceive of a 'society that unites all the European States',⁵ also views religion, along with Roman law, as the unifying force of this system.

I refer you to a book that came out in 2008 with the provocative title *The End of Europe: A*

4 Novalis, 'Christendom or Europe', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (State University of New York Press, 1997), 151.

The Plan for Perpetual Peace, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 11, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith Bush (Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 36.

5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau,

Political-Theological Catastrophe, whose authors chose to cloak themselves under the no less provocative name of Epimetheus.⁶ Europe appears here as an entity with two faces: one theological and the other political, with the catastrophe arising from their undue separation. But it seems unlikely to me that the Church – which is certainly in no better health today than other institutions – can provide the paradigm for a new political theology. I don't believe a political-theological conception of Europe is possible today.

Nonetheless, Gilson never tires of warning against a political secularization of Christianity:

The worst error would be to imagine Europe or even humanity as a perfection of the concept of universal Church or as the authentic City of God. Whatever the manner in which they are organized and united, temporal societies always form a society that is only temporal itself, more vast but the same in nature.

We know what Europe is when we know its structures and political frontiers. It will always be dangerous to hold up this real Europe as a sort of temporal Church, creator and possessor of a kind of universal

6 Epimeteo, *Finis Europae. Una catastrofe teologico politica* (Bibliopolis, 2008).

truth that alone can unify humans. (...) It would be lamentable that the birth of Europe should be the occasion of a new nationalism of things of the spirit, a little broader spatially, but no more intelligent than the old one.⁷

It is to Gilson that we owe a critical reflection on Europe's body, from which I draw the title of today's talk:

In those emotional gatherings where so many great minds hopefully scrutinize the future of United Europe, how many times have we not heard it said: Gentlemen, others are in the process of giving a body to Europe, but if we do not give it a soul, how will this body live?

There is no doubt about that, but which soul do we mean? Everyone proposes his own, but it is always the soul of something other than Europe, something that Europe is not and never will be. Does anyone dare to point this out? He will immediately be accused of not believing in Europe, of not having faith in Europe, in short of delaying the birth for which he should be working. His thoughts may be completely different. Perhaps he simply judges that

7 Gilson, *Metamorphoses*, 229, 228.

8 Gilson, 183.

even if it were in our power to create souls, it would be a wise precaution to make sure about the body before getting to work.⁸

I'd like to focus on these last words, which strike me as truly important. An instructive example of these purely abstract attempts to give Europe a soul regardless of its body is a lecture Husserl gave in Vienna in 1935, with the title 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity'. Here, Europe is defined solely by its original, constitutive relationship with philosophy – understood as the infinite task of an imprecisely formulated 'European humanity'. This leads Husserl to conclude his lecture with the following words: 'There are only two escapes from the crisis of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy.'⁹ Perhaps Husserl ought to have specified which body he expected to experience the rebirth. Certainly not the body of Nazi Germany, in which he nonetheless lived. Perhaps, if the soul Gilson writes about has never been found, and if Europe lives off a mixture

9 Edmund Husserl, 'Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity', in *The Crisis of European*

Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, trans. David Carr (Northwestern University Press, 1970), 299.

of lies and illegitimacy, it is because we have paid no attention to the body we wanted to infuse with an illusion of life.

The moment has come, then, to reflect on this body and, hence, examine the attempt of our age to realize something like a European political-legal reality for the first time, in the process that has led to the constitution of the current European Union: 'a body politic', as Hobbes writes, who titled the second part of his *Elements of Law* (published in 1640) *De corpore politico*. When speaking of Europe today, the major repressed element is, first and foremost, Europe's own political and legal reality. This is a genuine act of repression, as can be seen in the efforts made to avoid bringing into conscious thought a truth every bit as embarrassing as it is obvious. I'm referring to the fact that, from the perspective of constitutional law, Europe does not exist: what we call the European Union is technically a pact between states, governed exclusively by international law. The Maastricht Treaty, enacted in 1993 and giving the European Union its current structure, is the ultimate validation of European identity as a mere inter-governmental accord. Consequently, knowing that talk of a democracy makes no sense when it comes to Europe, European Union officials have attempted to remedy this democratic deficit by working on the project of a so-called European Constitution.

It is significant that the text known by this name, drafted by bureaucratic commissions without any popular mandate and ratified by an inter-governmental conference in 2004, was resoundingly rejected when submitted to popular referendums, as in France and the Netherlands in 2005. Faced with this failure to obtain popular ratification, which effectively nullified the would-be constitution, the project was tacitly – and, perhaps it should be added, shamefully – abandoned and replaced by a new international treaty, the so-called Lisbon Treaty of 2007. It goes without saying that, from a legal standpoint, this document is not a constitution but yet another agreement between governments, an accord whose sole legal basis resides in international law – and that its submission to a popular vote has therefore been carefully withheld.

Some years earlier, the issue of the European Constitution led to a debate between Dieter Grimm, a German legal scholar of indisputable expertise, and Jürgen Habermas, who, like most self-styled philosophers, possessed no grounding in juridic culture whatsoever. In opposition to Habermas, who believed the constitution could ultimately be founded upon public opinion, Grimm had little difficulty in demonstrating the inadmissibility of a constitution – for the simple reason that there was no such thing as a European people, and, thus, no

conceivable basis for any notion of a constituent power.

While legal doctrine maintains that a constituted power presupposes a constituent authority, the idea of a European constituent power is glaringly absent from discussions on Europe. Grimm showed that the litmus test for the lack of a constituent power shared among the peoples of the member states and the citizens of the Union lies in the Treaty's revision procedure. Whoever is authorized to revise the treaties holds the constituent power of the EU and therefore exercises the right of sovereignty. Both the Lisbon and the Maastricht Treaties entrust this power to a Convention, yet this entity is neither elected by citizens nor composed of them. The final decision continues to rest with the member states' Conference of Heads of State and Government, followed by ratification under the provisions of their respective national constitutions. Therefore, apart from a few insignificant and marginal issues, treaty revisions are still decided by the member states.

As far as its constitution is concerned, then, the European Union has no legitimacy. It is therefore perfectly understandable that a political entity lacking a legitimate constitution cannot express a politics of its own. Europe achieves an illusion of unity only when acting as a vassal of the United

States, when participating in wars that do not align in any way with shared interests and even less with the popular will. Today, the European Union acts as a subsidiary of NATO (an organization that is itself a military agreement between states). Moreover, some treaty signatory states, such as Italy, are technically protectorates and not sovereign states due to the number of military bases they host.

For this reason, putting a slightly ironic spin on the image Marx used for communism, one might say that the spectre haunting Europe now – which no one today dares to name – is the idea of a European constituent power. And yet, only this constituent power would be able to restore legitimacy and reality to European institutions. (Needless to say, I fully recognize that, when examined impartially, the notion of a constitution is far from clear. However, it is equally evident that no organization created through an intergovernmental accord which has not been ratified by the popular vote can be deemed 'democratic'.)

Not to mention that the executive's dominance over the legislative branch – which, as you know, typifies the development of modern so-called democratic states – reaches its apogee in the European Union. If the relationship between legislative and constitutive power has been inverted in the legal practice of democratic states, with

parliaments merely executing and ratifying executive decisions, the so-called European Parliament cannot be considered a true parliament: it lacks legislative initiative, a power held exclusively by the European Commission, currently chaired by an individual who, by all evidence, is completely irresponsible. And while a parliamentary motion of no confidence should topple a government, the European Parliament can present motions of no confidence, but in no way do these lead to the resignation of the European Commission. It is also significant that, until now, only eight of these motions have been presented, and not one of them has been approved.

Another vision of Europe will become possible only when we have cleared the field of this misrepresentation. This means that it's not a matter of proposing theoretical paradigms but of cultivating a thought that enfolds within itself a practice, namely a political task. To state it plainly: if we genuinely want to envision a political Europe, the first step is to get rid of this Europe — or at the very least, be ready for the moment when its collapse, as now seems imminent, occurs.

If something like Europe has never been realized politically and never can be, where should we look for its existence? Where should we look for its body? The Romans used to say *Omne quod potest*

videri corpus dicitur, 'the body is everything one can see'. But where do we see a body for Europe? I suggest shifting our focus to literature, where, while we might not have a body, we at least have a visible *corpus* – in the sense of a body of texts. From this perspective, I'd like to examine two pivotal episodes or 'samples' in twentieth-century European poetry. Poets can be wrong, but they certainly see better than political theorists and experts.

The first episode, though later in time, is when Ezra Pound, imprisoned in Pisa in 1945, composed *The Pisan Cantos*. I'm intrigued by a line in Canto 76: 'From the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor' (*scriptor* here clearly stands for 'scribe', not 'writer'). What does it mean that Pound is composing the *Cantos* as a transcription – as a scribe might do – of Europe's wreckage? After the end of World War I, for anyone who had managed to keep some lucidity, it was clear that something irreparable had happened in Europe and that the connection between past and present had been severed. That the poets and artists were the first to notice should come as no surprise, given that the task of conveying what is most precious in Europe – language and the senses – falls to them. Readers of the *Cantos* know that Pound appears to gather and juxtapose, piece by piece, the debris of this wreckage. Homer and Cavalcanti, Mani and Mussolini, Dante

and Browning, Persephone and Woodrow Wilson, a book of economics and the poetry of Arnaut Daniel are invoked together in no apparent chronological order, like flotsam that surfaces momentarily from the sea of forgetfulness before endlessly plunging back into its depths. Pound proceeds like a philologist who, in the irrevocable crisis of every tradition, tries to transmit without footnotes the very impossibility of the transmission.

Another example, also taken from a poet, can help us answer this question: *The Waste Land*, published in 1921, issuing from the close collaboration of Eliot and Pound, *il miglior fabbro* (the better craftsman), to whom the poem is dedicated. In reality, the poem presents itself as a collage of phrases and figures drawn from the entire history of Western culture (including some material from the East), in which the Sibyl of Cuma and the Grail, Ludwig II of Bavaria and the Fisher King, the sermons of Buddha and Gérard de Nerval, Philomela and the tarot deck, Dante and the Upanishads, Ovid and Phlebas the Phoenician, and so on, follow upon one another. As Ernst Curtius observed, comparing Eliot to an Alexandrine poet, these fragments do not fit together into an intelligible mosaic; rather, they remain somewhat Dadaistically isolated without any reciprocal resonance, because their meaning resides in their very incomprehensibility.

It is important not to overlook the paradoxical task the poets set out for us here. The European cultural tradition is not evoked, as it had been up until then, for its capacity to nourish and guide people's lives and minds but, on the contrary, for the very fact that it seems to have lost this capacity. What we are shown is precisely this loss.

Critics' attempts to bring to light a meaning hidden under this heap of fragments were destined to fail. The wasteland is that of European culture, whose tradition was cut short, leaving the poet with no other choice than to gather up the scrap: 'these fragments I shored against my ruins', concludes Eliot, acting truly like an Alexandrian philologist who brings together pell-mell the fragments that survived the fire of the great library. It is no accident that the word 'Europe' appears only once in the poem: in the section titled 'The Burial of the Dead'.

Since what interests me here is the meaning of the term 'Europe', I feel compelled to point out that, in the two poems cited, the word only appears starting from wreckage and fragments salvaged from a shipwreck; in other words, Europe is evoked solely in its ruin and devastation. The term denotes something that has ended, something that has had its time, perhaps even before it lived.

I'd like to shift now to roughly two decades later and talk to you about a book published

immediately after the end of World War II. In 1946, Erich Auerbach, a professor of romance philology exiled to Istanbul, published what was immediately regarded as a masterpiece of comparative literary scholarship: *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Although the word 'Europe' does not appear in the title, it has been suggested that the book is an elegy – or, better yet, a requiem – for European literature, from its origins to the twentieth century. When presenting a collection of his writing a few years later, Auerbach uses the same expression that Eliot had for his poem – 'fragments':

The ensuing fragments – like my work as a whole – spring from the same presuppositions as theirs. My work, however, shows a much clearer awareness of the European crisis. (...) European civilization is approaching the term of its existence; its history as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, for already it is beginning to be engulfed in another, more comprehensive unity. Today, however, European civilization is still a living reality within the range of our perception. Consequently – so it seemed to me when I wrote these articles and

10 Eric Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*,

trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, 1993), 6. First published in German in 1958.

so I still believe – we must today attempt to form a lucid and coherent picture of this civilization and its unity.¹⁰

Moreover, a few years earlier, writing from Istanbul – where he had just emigrated with his friend Walter Benjami – Auerbach commented: 'It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the present international situation is nothing but a ruse of providence, designed to lead us along a bloody and tortuous path to an International of triviality and a culture of Esperanto [*Esperantokultur*]'.¹¹

Once again, the term 'Europe', whose meaning I set out to examine, names something that no longer exists. This is a singular fact which I encourage you to consider: whereas the term 'Europe' had been used in the past to denote something yet to come, now it is something that has met its end, so to speak, even before coming into being. Europe manifests itself in its passing away; its body is apprehensible only in its non-being or no-longer-being.

I invite you to reflect on this discomfiting yet undeniably intriguing fact. What does it mean to apprehend and comprehend something starting from its end? We do well to free ourselves from the

11 Cited in Karlheinz Barck, 'Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach: Fragments of a Correspondence',

Diacritics 22, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 82.

prejudice that what seems to have run its course and now appears finished is for this reason uninteresting. In fact, it may be precisely when a construct appears to us as past that it can reveal possibilities and meanings we were previously unable to see. *Nekyia*, the descent into the world of the dead, may prove more instructive than the study of those we regard as alive. There's a line in a letter by Benjamin Franklin that might be useful to reflect on from the perspective of what interests us here: 'A man is not completely born until he be dead'.¹² I think this is even more true of languages and cultures. No language, no culture can be said to be completely born until it is dead. But this also means that we can't truly know them except in their final hour. Knowledge of a culture – in our case, Europe – and its potential departure toward something new is only possible for a gaze that contemplates it in its ending. By inviting you to view Auerbach's predicament in 1946 as an emblem of our own condition, what I implicitly suggest is that we, too, are living through the end of Western culture – an end that, as historians know, may span centuries – but with markedly less awareness and courage.

12 Benjamin Franklin, 'From Benjamin Franklin to Elizabeth Hubbard, 22 February 1756'. Founders Online, [https://founders.](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0171)

[archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0171](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0171). Reprinted from *The Massachusetts Magazine* (1789): 100.

What is Europe for Auerbach? What does it mean for him to comprehend Europe starting from its end? To answer these questions, we need to read *Mimesis* not as it has so often been – as if it were a textbook of literary history, or, as the subtitle suggests, a history of realism in Western culture. Nothing is farther from Auerbach's intentions. He himself notes that understanding the book requires viewing it as a work 'that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s'.¹³ These words can legitimately be seen as holding an eschatological intent, as it were: at the brink of impending catastrophe, it is a matter of salvaging what the author regards as consubstantial with his idea of Europe. And he does so in the most concrete way possible, through readings of twenty literary works, by authors from Homer to Virginia Woolf, chosen as samples of something crucial that becomes visible only through their treatment and analysis. The word 'sample', *campione* in Italian, derives from *campio*, Latin for battlefield: the battle Auerbach wages is hand-to-hand combat with the demise of European culture, striving to wrest from its dying

13 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought*, trans. Willard R. Trask, introduction by Edward

Said, Princeton University Press, 2013, 574. First published in German in 1946.

grasp something precious that the author is determined to salvage at all costs.

This precious asset, which defines Europe for Auerbach, is a particular way of grasping and living everyday reality. Every chapter, every sample shows a different facet and aspect of it. In the opening chapter, 'Odysseus' Scar', his reading of an episode from the *Odyssey* reveals how Homer renders reality with immediacy and brings it alive with no conflict between sensory phenomena and their meaning; without secrets, as it were. In the 'Farinata and Cavalcante' episode, the representation of the human being's earthly form realizes and surpasses the figural conception of human existence central to the Christian tradition. Rabelais' laughter and exuberant linguistic invention gives rise to what Auerbach calls 'the joy of discovery'¹⁴ — an embrace of reality's magnificent diversity, just as it is. Stendhal's serious depiction of the everyday and Virginia Woolf's meticulous description of any given moment in her character's lives continue in the same vein.

The question running throughout this extraordinary book is thus: 'Does there exist a sensibility and form of living that we can call Europe?' And can we uphold this sensibility and this form of life as the basis for a political imperative? Perhaps we

14 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 284.

should abandon discussions about Europe's *body politic* entirely unless we first grasp this body's particular sensibility and life. It is in the thought of thinkers like Auerbach – not political theorists or experts – that something akin to a body politic rather than a *political corpse* takes shape. Only by returning to these questions, perhaps, will it be possible to envision, beyond current abstractions and misrepresentations, something like a body inseparably united with its soul – a political and spiritual reality of Europe.

The first of these was the discovery of gold in California in 1848. This discovery led to a great influx of people to California, and the state became a great center of population. The second was the discovery of gold in Nevada in 1859. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Nevada, and the state became a great center of population. The third was the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Colorado, and the state became a great center of population. The fourth was the discovery of gold in Idaho in 1860. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Idaho, and the state became a great center of population. The fifth was the discovery of gold in Montana in 1862. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Montana, and the state became a great center of population. The sixth was the discovery of gold in Wyoming in 1869. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Wyoming, and the state became a great center of population. The seventh was the discovery of gold in Utah in 1871. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Utah, and the state became a great center of population. The eighth was the discovery of gold in Arizona in 1873. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Arizona, and the state became a great center of population. The ninth was the discovery of gold in New Mexico in 1875. This discovery led to a great influx of people to New Mexico, and the state became a great center of population. The tenth was the discovery of gold in Texas in 1877. This discovery led to a great influx of people to Texas, and the state became a great center of population.

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The Body of Europe

A ghost is haunting Europe: the ghost of Europe itself. It is a ghost without flesh and bone – a vanishing body that seems to satisfy itself with a vague geographical description. At best Europe refers to the sister of Cadmus, once upon a time abducted by Zeus. Can't we do better? Is Europe condemned to incarnate itself in a name whose sole reality is to be the one of a political strategy, of a way to deal with crisis? Wouldn't it be time that we start to interrogate what Europe could mean beyond ghosts and petty politics? After all, it is very well possible that what we call Europe *has* a body, has a *corpus* – and that this corpus is no other than the ensemble composed by the fragments of its literary history. What if Europe was not a matter of geography or politics, but a matter of literature – a matter of sense and sensibility: a way to welcome what, in a human body, makes it alive?

Giorgio Agamben

is a philosopher. His work, translated and commented all over the world, has been awarded the most prestigious prizes. His last book in English is *The Unrealizable: Towards a Political Ontology* (Seagull, 2025).

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